

ESHOES OF THE MISSION

1919

Chronicles of the Nicobar Endeavor



The latter soon departed this life, as likewise Fleckner, at Tranquebar. In September, I returned to Nancauvery, being commissioned to convey the house belonging to the Imperial settlement on Sombrero (Comarty) to our place, which I accomplished. Our old stone house was turned into a magazine, and the Missionaries obtained a comfortable dwelling, and a sufficient supply of provisions, and other necessaries. But as to any success in making the natives acquainted with the gospel, all our exertions seemed in vain. After my return to Tranquebar, in , Brother Rudolphi left Nicobar, and arrived, after a long and tedious voyage, at Tranquebar, in. Not long after, Brother J. Heinrich departed this life, and Brother Kragh remained alone. The loss of so many valuable men, the total failure of the object of the Mission, and the want of proper Brethren, willing to devote themselves to so hopeless a cause, at length prevailed, and it was resolved to give up the Mission.

I was again deputed to go to Nancauvery, to fetch Brother Kragh, and all effects belonging to the Mission, and to deliver up the premises to the Governor, who, on our representation of the impracticability of our supporting the Mission any longer, had consented to send a lieutenant, a corporal, and six privates, to take possession. I accompanied these people, and delivered to them every thing I could not carry away. Words cannot express the painful sensations which crowded into my mind, while I was thus executing the task committed to me, and making a final conclusion of the labours of the Brethren in the Nicobar Islands.

I remembered the numberless prayers, tears, and sighs offered up by so many servants of Jesus, and by our congregations in Europe, for the conversion of the poor heathen here; and when I beheld our burying-ground, where eleven of my Brethren had their resting-place, as seed sown in a barren land, I burst into tears, and exclaimed: Surely all this cannot have been done in vain! Often did I visit this place, and sat down and wept at their graves. My last farewell with the inhabitants, who had flocked to me from all the circumjacent islands, was very affecting. They wept and howled for grief, and begged that the Brethren might soon return to them. We always enjoyed their esteem and love, and they do not deserve to be classed with their ferocious neighbours, the Malays; being, in general, kind and gentle in their dispositions, except when roused by jealousy, or other provocations; when their uncontrolled passions will lead them into excesses, as some of the Danish soldiers experienced. We always found them ready to serve us.

LETTER III.

I proceed to answer the questions you have put to me, and to give you some short account of the appearance of the country in the Nicobar Islands, and the customs of the inhabitants. The most of these islands are hilly, and some of the mountains of considerable height: but Tricut, Tafouin, and Kar Nicobar, are flat, and covered with forests of cocoa trees. The other islands have likewise a large proportion of cocoa and areca palms, and an immense quantity of timber trees of various kinds, some of them of enormous size. All the vallies and sides of the hills, to a considerable height, are thickly covered with them, insomuch, that the light of the sun has not been able for ages to penetrate through their foliage. They are in many places so closely interwoven with immense quantities of rattan and bush-rope, that they appear as it were spun together; and it is almost perfectly dark in the woods. Most of the plants and trees bear fruit, which falls down and rots.

All these circumstances contribute to render the climate very unhealthy, the free current of air being wholly impeded; even the natives experience their baneful effects, but, to a European constitution, they are of the most dangerous nature. I am no botanist, and can therefore give you but little information concerning the different species of trees, shrubs, and plants, which seem to thrive here in such luxurious abundance; but will only add, that that most useful of all trees, the cocoa, is of very easy growth, and thrives best on the sea coast, where its roots and stem are reached by the flood-tide. The nut, falling into the sand, is soon covered by it, and springs up in great strength. I have planted many, and enjoyed the fruit after five years. When the nuts are ripe, you hang them about the house: in a short time they shoot out sprigs and branches, and when these are about a yard long, you may put them into the ground, where they continue to vegetate rapidly. Another most beautiful and valuable tree is the Mango, the fruit of which is extremely useful, both for eating and medicinal purposes. The eatable part is inclosed in a shell, which lies in a thick, pulpy rind. Its taste is spicy, very grateful, betwixt sour and sweet, and so wholesome,

that there is hardly any fear of eating too plentifully of it.

The shell is bitter and astringent, and the Nicobar doctors, or sorcerers, administer a decoction of it against fevers and agues, to which they, as well as strangers, are much subject. There is also a vast variety of roots, fruits, and herbs, with the medicinal virtues of which the sorcerers are well acquainted. They are, no doubt, noticed by various authors, but I am not able to describe them. As to the beasts and reptiles existing in these islands, I shall only mention what has come under my own observation, and remains in my recollection. There are no wild beasts here, such as tygers and leopards, as on the coast of Coromandel. Monkies are found in the southernmost islands, Sambelong, Tavap, and Katsoll. In some others are large herds of buffaloes and other cattle, originally brought thither by the Danes, but which have run wild in the woods, since the abandonment of the colony.

They have increased prodigiously; and as the upper regions of the mountains are covered with vast quantities of fine grass, they find food in abundance, and grow to a large size, especially the buffaloes. These are always seen in herds, and I never ventured to shoot any, though I longed to procure some of their flesh for our use. Dogs and swine are found in all the islands. Serpents are numerous in some places, but they are far less abundant and venomous, than on the coast of Coromandel. The chief cause of this difference I am apt to ascribe to a custom, prevalent among the natives, of setting the long grass on the mountains on fire, two or three times a-year. As these reptiles like to lay their eggs in the grass, great quantities of them are thus destroyed. One kind of serpent struck me here as a singular species; it is of a green colour, has a broad head and mouth like a frog, very red eyes, and its bite is so venomous, that I saw a woman die within half an hour after receiving the wound.

She had climbed a high tree in search of fruit, and not observing the animal among the branches, was suddenly bitten in the arm. Being well aware of the danger, she immediately descended, but, on reaching the ground, reeled to and fro like one in a state of intoxication. The people brought her immediately to me; and while I was applying blisters and other means for extracting the poison, she died under my hands. I saw but few scorpions, but among them an unusually large species, of a red colour, said to be extremely venomous. They were lying in a boggy place, and I had no means of taking them. One of the most formidable animals with which these islands abound, is the crocodile, or alligator. Kar Nicobar is overrun with them, as are all the other Nicobar islands, which have fresh-water lakes and streams. They are of two kinds, the black kayman, and the proper crocodile. The latter is said never to attack live creatures, but to devour only carrion, and is therefore not considered dangerous. Of the correctness of this opinion I had once ocular proof.

I was walking at Queda along the coast, and looking at a number of children swimming and sporting in the water. On a sudden, I observed a large crocodile proceed towards them from a creek. Terrified at the idea of the danger they were exposed to, I screamed out, and made signs to some Chinese to go to their assistance, but they laughed me to scorn as an ignorant stranger. I really afterwards saw the monster playing about among them, while the children diverted themselves by pretending to attack him and drive him away. The kayman is less in size, and very fierce, seizing upon every creature that has life, but he cannot lift anything from the ground, as the lower jaw projects. The bats of Nicobar are of a gigantic size; I have seen some, whose outstretched wings measured from five to six feet across the back, the body being the size of a common cat.

They are of two kinds; the head of one somewhat resembling a dog, and that of the other a cat; the former making a barking, and the latter a mewing noise, when on the wing. I never saw more than one at a time. They appear hideous, and in their solitary flight resemble a cloak in motion, chiefly and awkwardly perching upon the mango tree, the fruit of which they eat, breaking down the smaller branches, till they light upon such as are able to bear their weight. Of birds, I shall only notice one, called by some the Nicobar swallow³, but I will not venture to determine its generic character. It is the builder of those eatable nests, which constitute one of the luxuries of an Indian banquet.

These birds are called Hinlene by the natives, and build in fissures and cavities of rocks, especially in such as open to the south.

In the latter, the finest and whitest nests are found, and I have sometimes gathered fifty pound weight of them, on one excursion for that purpose. They are small, and shaped like swallows' nests. If they are perfect, of them go to a catty, or 1½ pounds. The best sale for them is in China. After the most diligent investigation, I was never able fully to discover of what substance they are made, nor do any of the opinions of naturalists, with which I have become acquainted, appear satisfactory to me, neither have the authors alluded to ever seen the birds. They have remarkably short legs, and are unable to rise, if they once fall or settle on the ground. I caught many in this state, and after examining them, threw them up into the air, when they immediately flew away; they cannot therefore, as some suppose, obtain their materials on the coast, or from rocks in the sea.

My opinion is, that the nests are made of the gum of a peculiar tree, called by some the Nicobar cedar, and growing in great abundance in all the southern islands. Its wood is hard, black, and very heavy. From December to May, it is covered with blossom, and bears a fruit somewhat resembling a cedar or pine-apple, but more like a large berry full of eyes or pustules, discharging a gum or resinous fluid. About these trees, when in bloom or bearing fruit, I have seen innumerable flocks of these little birds, flying and fluttering like bees round a tree or shrub in full flower, and am of opinion, that they there gather the materials for their nests. I relate the fact, having often watched them with great attention, but will not venture to affirm, that I have made a full discovery. I observed before, that these birds dwell in cavities of rocks, like bees in a hive, flying in and out, and building their nests close together, like martins or swallows.

The hen constructs a neat, large, wellshaped nest, calculated for laying and hatching her eggs, and the cock contrives to fix another, smaller and rather more clumsy, close to his mate: for they are not only built for the purpose of laying eggs, but for resting-places, whence they may take wing. If they are robbed of them, they immediately fall to work to build others, and being remarkably active, are able to finish enough in a day to support the weight of their bodies, though they require about three weeks to complete a nest. During the north-east trade wind, they are all alive and fly about briskly, but as soon as the wind comes round to the south-west, they sit or lie in their nests in a state of stupor, and show animation only by a kind of tremulous motion over their whole body. I have sometimes taken one out of his nest in this state, and laid him on the palm of my hand, when I observed no sign of life about him but this trembling, and on returning him to his place, could hardly prevent him from falling on one side.

If their nests were taken away at that season, the poor birds must inevitably perish. I did not perceive any great variety of birds in these islands; but wild pigeons and parrots are numerous. As to fishes, the sea abounds with various descriptions, but my attention was principally directed to shell-fish, which are found in great abundance and beauty on most of the islands, the Mission being in part supported by collections of these and other natural curiosities, made by me and other Brethren, whose time and disposition allowed of it. It became at one time peculiarly my business, and though I possessed no previous knowledge of these things, and would not venture to determine upon a proper classification of the various natural productions which I collected, both on the coast of Coromandel and in the Nicobar islands, yet constant practice and experience gave me by degrees sufficient skill to distinguish what was really worthy the attention of naturalists.

I had moreover the satisfaction to perceive the blessing of God resting upon these exertions, by which a considerable part of the heavy expences of the Mission were defrayed, there having been at that time a great demand for productions of this kind in England, Holland, Denmark, and other parts of Europe. On my frequent excursions along the sea coast, it sometimes happened that I was benighted, and could not, with convenience, return to our dwelling; but I was never at a loss for a bed. The greater part of the beach consists of a remarkably fine white sand, which above highwater-mark is perfectly clean and dry. Into this I dug with ease a hole large enough to contain my body,

forming a mound as a pillow for my head; I then lay down, and by collecting the sand over me, buried myself in it up to the neck.

My faithful dog always lay across my body, ready to give the alarm, in case of disturbance from any quarter. However, I was under no apprehension from wild animals. Crocodiles and kaymans never haunt the open coast, but keep in creeks and lagoons, and there are no ravenous beasts on the island. The only annoyance I suffered was from the nocturnal perambulations of an immense variety of crabs of all sizes, the grating noise of whose armour would sometimes keep me awake. But they were well watched by my dog; and if any one ventured to approach, he was sure to be suddenly seized, and thrown to a more respectful distance; or if a crab of more tremendous appearance deterred the dog from exposing his nose to its claws, he would bark and frighten it away, by which, however, I was often more seriously alarmed than the occasion required. Many a comfortable night's rest have I had in these sepulchral dormitories, when the nights were clear and dry.

But before I dismiss this subject I cannot conclude my letter, without observing, that on the continent, as well as in some of the other East Indian islands, it would be hazardous in the extreme to expose oneself in this manner, during the night, on account of the number of wild beasts, of various descriptions, with which they abound. I feel truly thankful to God, that He preserved me, on my many journeys, from all harm; nor can I speak of having ever been in much danger. Yet one instance of His merciful preservation of my life, I must be permitted to add. On one of my voyages either to or from Queda, (for I have forgotten the precise time) a Danish ship hailed us, and approaching incautiously, ran foul of our stern, and broke our flag-staff. We therefore put into a creek, and some of our men landed near a wood, to cut down a tree to make a new one. Hoping to be able to procure some fresh meat for supper, I accompanied them, armed with a double-barrelled gun.

While they were at their work, I walked on the outside of the wood, eagerly looking for some game, and soon discovered, among the high grass, an object, which, by its motions, I mistook for the back of a hare. I took aim, and was just going to fire, when the animal rose up, and proved to be a tyger, of which only the top of the head had been visible. My arm involuntarily sunk down; I stood motionless with horror, expecting that the creature would immediately make a spring at me, and gave myself up for lost; but, by God's providence watching over me, the beast seemed as much alarmed as I was, and after staring at me for a few moments, turned slowly about, and began to creep away, like a frightened cat, with his belly close to the ground; then, gradually quickening his pace, fled with precipitation into a distant part of the wood. It was some time before I recovered presence of mind sufficient to trace back my steps towards the beach, for I felt my very heart tremble within me.

As I approached the water, there was a piece of jungle, or low thicket before me, and I was turning to the left, to pass round by the side opposite the boat, thinking that I might yet find some game, when, seeing the men labouring hard to drag the tree they had felled, towards the water, I altered my course, and went to their assistance. No sooner had I entered the boat, than I discovered on that side of the jungle, to which I was first going, close to the beach, a large kayman, watching our motions, whom I should certainly have met, had I gone round by the way I intended.

Thankful as I now felt for this second preservation of my life, I could not help discharging my piece at the animal's head, and by the sudden plunge he made into the water, and the appearance of blood on the surface, as he was swimming towards the opposite shore, it seemed that one or both of the shots had penetrated his eye or throat. We saw him reach the shore, and crawl through the mud into the jungle. Part of the flesh of the crocodile or kayman is good and wholesome, when well cooked. It tastes somewhat like pork, for which I took it, and ate it with much relish, when I first came to Nancanwery; till, on inquiry, finding it to be the flesh of a beast so disgusting and horrible in its appearance and habits, I felt a loathing, which I could never overcome; but it is eaten by both natives and Europeans.

LETTER IV.

Since you have expressed satisfaction with my imperfect account of some of the natural productions of the Nicobar islands, and desire me to continue the subject, I regret that I cannot gratify you with a sight of the lists I kept, of the different kinds of serpents, crabs, spiders, and other creatures, which I caught everywhere, either to stuff, put into spirits, or otherwise prepare for my customers. At our garden near Tranquebar, I had a shop or work-room purposely constructed for these operations, and kept sometimes two or three Malabar boys at work to help me. Of serpents and snakes I had a list of upwards of eighty different species, from the size of a common worm, to sixteen and twenty feet long; of crabs, upwards of ninety; and of spiders, more than forty.

Whether I went into the woods, on the beach, by land, or by sea, I was accustomed to look about, and examine every object I saw, and acquired great facility in catching some of the most dangerous animals, without harm to myself. Far from being afraid of serpents, I went out purposely to discover their haunts, in the jungle or among the rocks, defending my legs with a pair of strong boots; and if I could prevent their slipping off into their holes, and irritate them so as to make them attempt to strike me, my work was done. For a serpent thus situated, will coil himself up, and instantaneously darting forward his head, strike and bite whatever comes in his way. I then presented my hat, which the animal violently seized with his fangs; when, instantly snatching it away, I seldom failed to extract them by the sudden jerk; for, being curved, they cannot be readily withdrawn, and sitting but loosely in the gums, are easily disengaged.

Being thus rendered in a great degree harmless, I pinned their heads down, and tied them up. Great care, however, is required, not to suffer yourself to be lacerated by their teeth, or in any other way, while preparing their heads, and refixing the fangs; for if a wound is thus inflicted, even long after their death, the consequences are dreadful, and often fatal, of which I might relate many singular instances, which came immediately under my observation. There is among them a short serpent, found in the neighbourhood of Tranquebar, and called by us, the Split-snake, (die Spalt-schlange). It is black, with a white streak down its back, dividing the body longitudinally. Its bite is extremely venomous; and being slender, it can insinuate itself into a very small hole or cranny, and will enter rooms and closets, in quest of food.

There was a door in a dark part of my work-room, with a large clumsy lock to it; and one evening, as I was attempting to open it, having to pass that way, I felt a sudden prick in my finger, and at the same time a violent electrical shock, as if I were split asunder. Not thinking of a serpent, I first imagined, that my Malabar boys had, in their play, wound some wire about the handle, by which I had been hurt, and asked them sharply, what mischief they had done to the door. They denied, that they had meddled with it, and I made a second attempt, when I was attacked still more violently, and perceived the blood trickling down my finger. I then returned into my room, sucking the wound, till I could draw no more blood. I applied some spirits of turpentine to it, put on a bandage, and being much hurried that evening with other business, made no farther inquiry about it.

However, in the night it swelled, and was very painful. In the morning, I went again into the work-room, when I thought I perceived an unpleasant, musky smell. On approaching the before-mentioned door, the stench was intolerable. I again asked the boys, what nasty thing they had brought into the room, for they were always at play; but they again denied any knowledge of the cause of the nuisance. A candle was brought, and I now beheld the origin of all the mischief. About six inches length of the head and body of a young split-snake hung out of the keyhole, quite dead; and on taking off the lock, I found the creature twisted into it, and so much wounded by the turn of the bolt, in attempting to open the door, that it had died in consequence. It had intended to enter the room through the keyhole, when I thus accidentally stopped its progress, and got bitten; and considering the deadly poison this serpent always infuses into the wound inflicted, I felt very thankful to God, my Preserver, that, by sucking the infected blood out of my finger in time, and applying a proper remedy, though ignorant of the cause of the wound, my life was not endangered.